

# Recognizable Forms

## Orange-Banded Variant of the Cedar Waxwing

by  
Ron Pittaway

In 1987 I was asked by John McLennan to identify a strange bird which had apparently flown into his window near Dorset, District of Muskoka. He described the bird as having a crest and a bright orange band along the tip of the tail. I was puzzled by the description until he sent me a colour photograph of the bird to examine. The bird in question proved to be a Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) in juvenal plumage.

Shortly after this event, I read a request in *Birder's World* for information about Cedar Waxwings with orange tail tips (Parkes and Wood 1988). I have since checked waxwings for this plumage variant. I saw my first Cedar Waxwing with a bright orange tail band 19 August 1989 near Port Perry, Durham Region. This bird was in juvenal plumage. It was fly-catching in association with several Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*). Strangely enough, I observed another juvenile waxwing with orange tail tips in exactly the same location on 14 August 1990. It was among approximately one dozen normally pigmented (yellow-banded) adult and juvenile waxwings. Since juvenile Cedar Waxwings moult into adult-like plumage (first basic) in their first fall, my 1989 and 1990 sightings were of two different birds. Interestingly, most reported cases of orange-banded

variants in Cedar Waxwings have been of birds in juvenal plumage (Hudon and Brush 1989).

Hudon and Brush (1989) reported the frequency of this colour variant has increased recently, and is not found in museum specimens older than about thirty years. They suggest the orange colour is possibly due to waxwings eating the fruit of introduced shrubs containing the pigment rhodoxanthin. More recently, Brush (1990) reported a possible source of the rhodoxanthin was the introduced Morrow's Honeysuckle (*Lonicera morrowii*). This species of honeysuckle is widespread in southern Ontario (Bill Crins, Dan Brunton, pers. comms. 1991).

Some observers have mistakenly referred to the orange-banded variant as the "Japanese race" of the Cedar Waxwing (Parkes 1983). This mistake possibly arose because the Japanese Waxwing (*Bombycilla japonica*) of northeastern Asia has red tail tips. However, as Parkes (1983) pointed out, Cedar Waxwings with orange tail tips have absolutely nothing to do with the concept of subspecies or race. Taxonomically, in animals, race is synonymous with subspecies. Subspecies are distinct geographical subdivisions of a species which interbreed freely (intergrade) or are potentially capable of interbreeding with other subspecies of the same species. As well, this form should not

be called a colour morph since colour morphs are usually genetically determined, like eye colour in humans. Therefore, this form of the Cedar Waxwing is best termed a colour variant.

For birders, the orange-banded variant of the Cedar Waxwing is a recognizable form of the species. By listing and reporting it, birders can contribute to the knowledge of the species. I would like to hear of any sightings birders may have encountered. I am also looking for examples of this colour variant in Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrulus*). As far as I know, one has never been reported. As well, please forward any observations to: Dr. Kenneth C. Parkes, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, PA, USA, 15213. Your reports should include the date seen, relative age of the bird, and the exact location of the observation.

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### Literature cited

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### Editors' Note

This is the first in a series on "Recognizable Forms" by Ron Pittaway. In this regular feature, Ron will discuss the identification, taxonomy and nomenclature of bird forms below the species level which are identifiable in the field. Ron is also preparing a checklist of recognizable forms such as subspecies, colour morphs, well-known hybrids, etc. for the next issue. Please contact him with your ideas and comments.

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